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ABSTRACT

Siena Heights College conducted a number of projects designed to enhance institutional vitality through support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. Institutional vitality is viewed as involving: a clearly designed and accepted mission for the unit in question; direction, attainable goals, and programs that enable fulfillment of the mission; and a climate that empowers individuals to be participants. Vitality is concerned with the socio-psychological well-being and enhancement of the individuals within the organization. A strategy for monitoring the morale in the institution, interpersonal relationships, and working conditions is built around Likert's Organizational Survey Profile. The survey is designed to examine coordination, communication, satisfaction, and leadership. The instrument was distributed to faculty, staff, and administrators in 1977, 1978, and 1979. Data yield an incomplete picture, which needs to be supplemented by ongoing anthropological assessment of the institution. Such an approach could present a contextual framework within which to organize the data that appear to be relevant to an understanding of institutional vitality. Questions that need to be examined for a general understanding in institutional vitality are presented. (SW)

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CAPTURING INSTITUTIONAL VITALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In 1976, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education[1] awarded a substantial grant to Siena Heights College for the purpose of enabling the institution to experiment with a number of projects designed to enhance institutional vitality. The ensuing three years have provided us not only with a deepened sense of the importance of maintaining vitality in the small, private college,[2] but also with some insights as to how the level of vitality can be monitored in ways meaningful to decision makers in the institution.

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[1]The FIPSE grant awarded Siena Heights College approximately $180,000 for a three year period in order to experiment with a number of programs which held promise for maintaining vitality in the conditions projected for the 1980's. These projects included: Small grants for faculty development, a social audit which is explained later in the paper, a short-term faculty exchange program, workshops for part-time faculty, organizational development projects, the bringing of promising doctoral students to the faculty on a temporary appointment for half-time teaching and an ongoing seminar on college teaching.

[2]Our use of the term "small, private college" in this paper refers primarily to those institutions called "invisible colleges" by Astin and Lee (see their Invisible Colleges. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.) Generally, they have little endowment, limited library resources, under 1,000 students, and a regional reputation at best. Siena Heights College enrolls approximately 1,100 students (875 FTE) and has a faculty of around 50 FTE. It is a four-year institution combining a number of professional programs with liberal arts course work.

DISCUSSION

"Vitality," of course, is an often used and poorly understood term. In our definition, we assume at least a stable, if somewhat constrained, fiscal condition and look to the behavioral dimension of the term. We view institutional vitality as involving:

- A clearly designed and accepted mission for the unit in question.
- Direction, attainable goals, and programs which enable fulfillment of the mission.
- A climate which empowers individuals to be participants in the fulfillment of the mission and to have the sense of being involved in a creative, productive, and energizing work life.

Thus, our view of vitality is intimately bound to the social-psychological well-being and enhancement of individuals within the organization and, at this point, is decidedly qualitative! We believe that it is not only appropriate, but quite probably imperative, to share these perspectives with members of the Association for Institutional Research. Although the key issues of the eighties in higher education are certainly economic in nature, we would argue that the "micro" consequences of the policies adopted to deal with economic contingencies may well determine whether or not colleges and universities can continue to be places in which creativity and excitement about learning can be promoted.

There is no question that institutional vitality is commonly regarded in economic terms as is the vitality of a city, a region, or an entire nation. We would be the first to agree that economic health is at the heart of any vital organization. Any number of indicators can provide a relatively simple and inexpensive way of monitoring fiscal health in a small private college: performance against inflation, cash flow, return on endowment, money set aside for maintenance, number of student applications relative to enrollment, retention of students, expenditures per student, and the like. It is essential

that small colleges understand these and other economic indicators as the vital signs that they really are.

Our paper, however, shall focus upon another dimension of the vitality question; the social and psychological components of an alive and vibrant institution. (Perhaps our efforts can be seen as advancing the idea of an index of socio-psychological indicators.) Even if economic indicators remain relatively stable during the eighties, many of those in the academic profession, and especially those in small colleges, are likely to feel a great deal of both professional and personal uncertainty. Added to this uncertainty will be a number of constraints that appear now to be almost inevitable consequences of many of the trends we can currently detect. It seems rather certain that job mobility will be low. The average age of college faculty will increase dramatically. With less money for travel and professional development, there will no doubt be fewer opportunities for professional interchange.

Together, all of these factors, and others only now dimly perceived, can bring about a rapid deterioration of morale, a sharp drop in the "volunteerism" which private colleges tend to live on, an increase in the phenomenon of burnout, an inability to stay abreast of one's field, and extraordinary levels of interpersonal conflicts. These are factors which describe an environment in which one would find it difficult to maintain a creative enthusiasm and a commitment to learning. Indeed, most academics, given a real choice, would not choose to work in such a setting.

Yet, unless we have ways of sensing the evolution of institutional environments over longer periods of time, many of the small, private colleges which do survive will slip into this state of psychic depletion, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to revive them. Small college environments

poisoned by the anxieties of a moribund faculty and staff are not places which can effectively stimulate learning and the varieties of personal growth so highly prized by these institutions.

The primary problem in the contemporary small, private college is that to key administrators life often seems, or is, a daily struggle for economic survival. Short-term pragmatic decision-making is the order of the day, and bits and pieces of quantitative data often override qualitative considerations. In this kind of environment, planning is difficult and attention to the micro-concerns of the quality of life in the institution becomes almost completely obscured. Yet, in the eighties, institutional research must find a way to become more person-oriented and more interested in ways of collecting and organizing the qualitative information which can support and inform the strategies we evolve in order to cope with the morale issue.

The FIPSE project not only enabled us to inject some novelty and opportunity into academic life at Siena Heights College, but it also made us keenly aware of the dynamics of vitality on the campus. In the context of Program Evaluation for FIPSE, we were able to establish both formal and informal evaluative procedures and to establish some ways of monitoring the life-signs of the institution.

ASSESSMENT

Formal project evaluation was based on the observations of a three-person team which was appointed early in the granting period and remained with the project over the course of its three year life. These individuals, drawn both from the ranks of researchers on faculty and practicing academic administrators, visited the campus five times during the project, examining the evidence of project completion and conducting interviews with a variety of members of the

campus community. The written reports of the evaluators were largely impressionistic, but contained some valuable insights which enriched our sense of institutional vitality.

The problem with periodic observation of this kind, however, lies in the rather volatile nature of the small, private college. In general, these institutions can be said to be more sensitive to various disruptions than are their larger counterparts. A change in a key administrative role, the receipt of a major grant, a small turnover in faculty, can cause major changes in institutional direction in small colleges where they would scarcely be noticed on the campus of a major university. One of the evaluators from a major university put the issue succinctly when he pointed out that, "he could leave his post for six months and return to find nothing substantially changed while those in charge of a small school could go out to lunch and return to a completely different college".

This hyperbole only underscores the methodological problem facing us in our efforts to capture the status of institutional vitality. The formal evaluations are, in effect, a set of "snapshots" of the status of the college and, while providing insight into our general situation, do not give us the data we need on a regular basis.

Our definition of vitality, however, suggested some strategies for monitoring the longer-term evolution of morale in the institution in the context of our FIPSE grant. The proposal itself called for a social audit to be conducted each year of the grant in order to ascertain the "health" of persons, interpersonal relationships, and working conditions in the college. The social audit, built around Likert's Organizational Survey Profile[3], became our chief monitoring device for determining the rythms of institutional vitality.

[3]Copyright 1976, Rensis Likert Associates; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois.

Other approaches were related to particular activities of the grant. One survey assessed the relationships among faculty on campus. Its results tended to explode the myth that each small college is a tightly knit community in which the various faculty members tend to know one another in-depth. The point is, however, that these data are still "clues". We believe them to be related to vitality as we perceive it, but the context in which these data are generated often substantiates their meaning.

For example, the survey which yielded the data suggesting a high degree of fragmentation could point to an organizational condition of isolation and conflict in which loneliness and mistrust were the norm, or it could indicate arenas in which a high level of creativity or excitement about research bonded a small group of professionals together. As the activities of the grant progressed and our thinking about the issue of vitality become more focused, we developed a partial list of candidates for what we called "life signs" in the institution. Some of these are as follows:

- "work group" cohesiveness,
- "acceptable" level of interpersonal conflict,
- degree of change in the academic program,
- per cent of faculty attending professional events off campus per year,
- positive characterization of institution by faculty and staff,
- general agreement of nature of mission,
- level of "volunteerism,"
- good communication patterns on campus,
- nature of issues before the faculty,

- turnover and reasons for it,
- extant vision of institution's future,
- level of instructional experimentation,
- perception of personal impact,
- perception of personal mobility,
- existence of an "audience" for a faculty member's work beyond his or her students.

These items are again "clues" as to the level of vitality at a particular institution. We lack, however, comparative data and, in fact, we are without accurate means of obtaining the data in many of the cases. In and of themselves, these indicators are interesting, but in the absense of contextual information they yield only fragmentary glimpses of the life of the institution.

As we have noted, an important element of this project was a social audit, planned as a recurrent survey of both working conditions and morale at the college. For this purpose, we chose the Likert Organizational Survey Profil and administered it in the spring of 1977, 1978, and 1979. Results are available at this time for the 1977 and 1978 surveys, and they point up both the usefulness of this approach and the frustrations of attempting to interpret and utilize the data.

The Likert Organizational Survey Profile is designed to examine institutional climate, including coordination, communication, satisfaction, and leadership. The instrument focuses on work groups, their cohesiveness, their relationship to one another and their relationship to other levels in the organization. At Siena Heights, this instrument was distributed to eighty-five faculty, staff, and administrators in 1977, with a return of eighty. In 1978, it was distributed to eighty-three persons with a return of seventy-one; and in 1979, it was given to ninety individuals with a return of seventy-seven. We identified fifteen "work groups," including Business

Affairs, Dean of Students, Development, Admissions, President's Office, and all sectors of Academic Affairs.

Comparison of the results on the survey from 1977 and 1978 yielded fascinating data, as follows:

- a scale known as Motivational, which was rated at the 20th percentile in 1977, moved to the 58th percentile in 1978;
- a scale measuring effectiveness of organizational communication moved from the 29th to the 55th percentile;
- "technological readiness," the ability of the organization to support initiatives by faculty and staff, moved from the 20th to the 42nd percentile;
- administrative practices, how decisions are made, their effectiveness, and information available, moved from the 32nd percentile to the 58th percentile;
- lateral coordination, supervisory leadership, and openness, all scored comparable gains.

We have displayed these figures to suggest that something rather dramatic had occurred in the environment of Siena Heights College to cause substantial changes in these conditions of vitality. In uncovering this data, the Likert instrument proved of great value in pointing to the manifestations of this change.

It would be nice to suggest that this relatively substantial movement could be traced specifically to the FIPSE grant and to the activities which were designed to bring about these conditions. During this two-year period, however, the college was undergoing several other major interventions. The first of these was a one million dollar AIDP grant from Title III which provided a large sum for program and faculty development and could likely have played a role in program development. Another intervention was a change in the presidency which brought a different style of leadership to the campus, along with the inevitable honeymoon. Whether these three major factors, and

others, operated together or differentially to produce the effect we have noted is difficult for us to answer in the context of the methodology we employed.

The data which the Likert Survey provided us, along with the other data sources we have mentioned, are bits and pieces of a puzzle. As we have mentioned, they seem to have little utility unless interpreted in terms of the context from which they emerge. We shall discuss a means of establishing this context shortly, but first want to point out some potential sources of data which would extend and amplify that developed by the Likert Survey. Our use of the Likert Survey pointed to the need for further development of instruments which would be sensitive to the signals or life signs given off by the physiology of the organization.

One of these potential instruments would be a conflict indicator designed to get at the levels of interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal, conflict occurring within the college and to sound an alarm when it appeared to be becoming pathological. Conflict within bounds can lead to creativity and is probably inherent in the human organization, but debilitating conflict which draws its momentum from pathological conditions in the organization can quickly destroy morale and, thus, any environment (or supports) for learning and personal development which may exist. We envision the projected conditions of the eighties focusing interpersonal conflict in small institutions to the point of making them intolerable places to live and work. We need to know more about human conflict in small organizations; which are resolvable and which are not, how they may be managed, and how their level changes in response to circumstances.

We are convinced, also, that healthy communication patterns support the development of vitality. Breakdowns in communication resulting from mistrust,

inattention, or lack of proper networking, can quickly lead to disorganization, chaos, and consequent poor morale. In any monitoring of vitality, a continuing examination of "communicating" behavior throughout the organization is a necessity. We are encouraged by the development of a structured communication audit by the International Communication Association. This structured study of formal and informal communication nets in organizations can provide deep insights into malfunctions in the institution's environment which are only hinted at by the Likert instrument.

Our third and final suggestion for monitoring instrumentation returns us to our initial view of vitality. We are convinced that to overcome the predicted problems of the eighties, a small college faculty and staff must share a vision or mission which is both a source of pride and uniqueness for that particular college. Most, we would argue, will not succeed as "mini" universities.

Thus, it seems to us that small colleges are in need of some kind of normed instrument which measures commitment to mission, shared perceptions of the mission and, importantly, progress made in implementing it. We have examined the various "goal-setting" instruments and inventories commercially available and have concluded that they are too general for the purposes we seek. Nevertheless, this kind of information, delivered in a regular fashion, could provide important insights into the vitality of the college. Missions must be well integrated, not grafted on; and they must be part of the daily life of the college, not "founders day" statements, lest they be generators of cynicism rather than creativity and advancement.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

We have underscored the idea that in our search for the elusive notion of institutional "vitality" and its antecedents, the kinds of data we have noted are only pieces which, as part of a larger puzzle, yield only an incomplete picture. Our investigation of the idea of institutional vitality in conjunction with the FIPSE grant has convinced us of the need for ongoing development of a context in which to view the data. We have mentioned the existence of a formal evaluation team which visited the campus on several occasions and provided us with comprehensive reports on the progress on the grant. While these reports provided some context for the various data we were generating, they fell short of what we now felt to be ideal.

The optimum strategy would appear to be a kind of ongoing anthropological assessment of the institution. An individual or individuals observing the institution and its mores over a period of time could not only provide a valuable view of the status of institutional vitality, but also could begin to present a contextual framework within which to organize the data which appear to be relevant to an understanding of institutional vitality.

In this regard, we would especially want to point out the pioneering work of Dr. Malcolm Parlett[4] and others who have evolved a process they call "illuminative evaluation". This methodology, which is quasi-anthropological in nature, seems to us to hold great promise in providing an overall picture which can be refined and elaborated by more specific forms of data we have discussed in this paper.

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[4]Malcolm Parlett and Garry Dearden, Introduction to Illuminative Evaluation: Studies in Higher Education. (Cardiff-by-the-Sea, Calif.: Pacific Soundings Press, July, 1977).

SOME QUESTIONS

In our primitive attempts to move toward a general understanding of institutional vitality, we have come to the conclusion that it is imperative to be aware of the phenomena of social-psychological vitality and to be able to raise questions about it in the life-cycle of the college.

Questions are the life blood of any investigation. They are essential to any effort to develop means of measuring it. Questions, indeed, are another route to a set of indicators which could be useful to decision makers in the institutions. The following are examples of the kinds of questions we raised as both participants in the FIPSE project and as conceptualizers of the processes of vitality:

- To what degree do physical working conditions and availability of office supplies support "institutional vitality"?
- What is "burnout" on a small college campus? How much of it is perception? Reality? What are the strategies for dealing with it?
- What does "scholarship" mean for a small college? Are there new sources of recognition available for faculty?
- What role does tenure play in the maintenance of vitality?
- How should "hiring" be carried out so as to maintain vitality? Do we have any good models?
- What role does the opportunity for faculty to move off campus for periods of time play in institutional vitality?
- Does the "quality" of students affect faculty morale . . . and could this lead to a diminishment of vitality?
- What level of interpersonal conflict can destroy vitality on a small college campus? How can its existence be ascertained?
- Communication breakdowns are responsible for many small college problems. How can communication channels be cleared and accurate information be transmitted throughout the college?

SOME CONSTRAINTS

Much of what we have said here is based upon an idealistic set of assumptions which hold that it is possible for small, private colleges, strapped with fiscal problems and stretching personnel to capacity, to develop a means of monitoring life signs and then act on results they obtain. This may be a vain hope. Some strategies for decision-making must be developed which are in "sync" with the realities of the world of the small, private college. Any such strategy must be inexpensive, must require little methodological sophistication,[5] must provide data which are readily understandable, and must use the data in a very visible fashion.

The rapid nature of change in a small, private college can outdate data quickly, or can mask the real underlying factors which, in reality, are contributing to a particular set of circumstances. Personnel, when available to do studies of this nature often do not have the methodological ability to deal with, and make meaningful, the qualitative data which might be generated. Finally, the somewhat personalistic style of managing many of these institutions is not always compatible with the systematic use of systematic data. These are realities and need to be considered when viewing the prospects for the development of an index of socio-psychological indicators for small colleges.

SUMMARY

We have shared here some of the insights we have gained from dealing with a set of grant-supported activities designed to enhance vitality in our college.

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[5]Many small, private colleges can no longer afford an institutional research function. When it is present, it is usually burdened with a variety of "extra I.R." tasks and focuses primarily on hard data and form filling-out. There is little opportunity to pursue what may seem a potential "will-o-the-wisp" like vitality. In fact, a glance at the preliminary registration for the 1979 A.I.R. Forum shows only a handful of registrants representing this type of institution.

Our interests quickly moved beyond these activities to both the larger problems and possibilities of measuring vitality. We have noted the results of our social audit and have suggested that other instruments need development, but we caution that some way of keeping one's eye upon the context, the environment or the larger institutional picture is imperative.

From what we can gather, the academic profession, in general, is in a somewhat "down" state. As we see them, the eighties are likely to reinforce this mood and, perhaps, to institutionalize it for a time in American colleges and universities. We must be alert, informationally, lest our colleges evolve into sinks of despondency. It would be well for institutional researchers to begin to explore this relatively uncharted territory and to do some thinking about how to "capture" the various species of vitality.

Institutional researchers could have a major role to play in sharpening perceptions of gains and losses in vitality. Questions of the maintenance of vitality are likely to transcend the small, private colleges and to become major concerns at all levels of higher education.

In the final analysis, the personal dimensions of institutional vitality are likely to seem abstract to decision-makers worried about day-to-day funding and institutional survival. It is possible, we believe, to do some cost-effective monitoring of the "life signs" of small colleges and to generate a relatively accurate view of institutional vitality at any point in time. What we lack is both a general commitment to the development of this kind of data and good <u>models</u> of its linkage to decision-making or institutional adaptation on small college campuses.

Abstract as it may seem, the maintenance of institutional vitality is probably the key to quality in those small colleges which do survive the 1980's.

We should commit to the generation of qualitative data that will supplement our own hunches about the evolution of these colleges and to build these insights into strategies for enhancement of these colleges.

It is our hope that our comments here may plant the idea that in addition to a yearly fiscal audit, there are a variety of what might be called "behavioral" audits which all colleges and universities could profit from. These should be approached from the perspective that an institution of higher learning is a human community and that its social conditions and psychic health are likely to be subtle, but pervasive determinants, of its ability to promote learning.